

Buckham v. Nuss

Compliant Exhibit A

I Identify as a Free Person (2 pages)

I identify as a free person

It is difficult to articulate the animosity and unbounded repugnance that radiates from cops when they interact with prisoners. But I'll give it a try.

Their hostility begins with the demeaning way in which they label us. Every prisoner will be assigned a prison number and in most situations in prison he will be referred to by his number rather than by his name. Some examples include; when I check out books from the library, I am asked for my prison number rather than my name; I can't receive mail unless it has my prison number; I can't use the phone without first entering my prison number; and, I can't receive medical care without identifying myself through my prison number.

There are many other instances where my prison number has supplanted my given name. This may seem like a trivial matter but over time prisoners may come to identify their self as synonymous with their prison number. It is quite common for both prisoners and free people to tattoo their names across their back as a sign of pride in their heritage and family name. For a few prisoners, getting tattoos of their prison number (or numbers) is no different than getting a tattoo of their family name.

Most prisoners, however, see their prison number as degrading both in the way it is used as identification in lieu of personal names and the stigma the cops assign to the number and prisoners.

For many of the same reasons that prisoners see their prison number as degrading, they feel that being called "offender" or "inmate" as degrading. But the cops refer to and call prisoners "offender" and "inmate" all the time. They use the terms with derogatory intention even when they know the prisoner's given name. It is a psychological tool employed to both dehumanize prisoners and to remind them of their inferior status. The cops' use of the prison number is designed to strip a man of his individuality and supplant it with the sub-human identity the criminal justice system reserves for convicted felons.

I use the word prisoner to describe people in prison throughout all of my writings. This is no accident as I believe there are different definitions for prisoner, inmate, and offender. An offender is a person who has committed a crime and is in a penal facility or under supervised parole. While the term does, by my definition, apply to me and other prisoners I rarely use it in my writings as the cops use it in a pejorative way to project the impression of an offensive person. For these same reasons, I rarely use the term inmate. In fact, the only time I use the word inmate is when I am referring to someone who is a tool of the administration. A person who is a tool of the administration is typically one who provides information to the cops in exchange for favorable employment, housing, and/or parole considerations – or as a sleazy form of passive

aggressiveness used to control other prisoners and prison operations. Most often, the information provided is patently false but is believed as true by the cops because uncovering unlawful activity among the prisoners they are charged to control is both a job security practice and an escape from their ordinary, largely superfluous daily tasks. But I digress.

The reason I prefer to use the word prisoner is simply because people who are in prisons are prisoners. I understand that some reject this term when used for convicted criminals because it is also used to refer to military personnel who have become prisoners of war. However, that argument is a selling point for my use of the word as I believe that many people in prison today are prisoners of the War on Crime that began in the 1980s. In any event, the terms offender and inmate as used by the cops are intended to be offensive and deprecating and are understood as such by prisoners.

In all fairness, the name calling goes both ways as prisoners use a bunch of terms and phrases to refer to cops and none are very nice. I call the people who work in prisons cops. Do a Microsoft Word thesaurus search for the word cops and you won't find police, guard, defender, or any other virtuous synonym. What you find is steals, robs, snatches, and other terms for someone who takes something without permission.

While there are few cops who treat prisoners decently (they don't last very long as the real cops tend to badger them into quitting) the vast majority of cops do not recognize prisoners as fellow humans. They perceive us as something else, something to be avoided, something to harass, something to always be watchful of, something to make fun of and condemn, something that is not a person. Thus, cops is an appropriate term to describe people who work in prisons because they steal from people. They steal prisoners' humanity, they steal prisoners' dignity, and they steal prisoners' identities.

Being person in prison – a prisoner – does not define who I am. I think of myself as a free person and I identify as a free person which is why I refuse to accept the derogatory labels the cops try to pin on me.

Choosing to identify as a free person is not meant to be condescending to the groups of people who first coined the term nor is it meant to minimize their experiences. While I may not understand their individual reasons for choosing to identify as something other than the label society wants applied to them, I completely understand the humiliation, frustration, and confusion of being categorized as something that I am not.

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